

## The Third Sunday of Epiphany

*St Thomas, Salisbury, 2023*

*Isaiah 9:1-4*

*1 Corinthians 1:10-18*

*Matthew 4:12-23*

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

“Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you should be in agreement and that there should be no divisions among you... For it has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there are quarrels among you.” Words from our second reading this morning.

Today, as well as being the Third Sunday of Epiphany, is the fifth day of the week of prayer for Christian Unity. This annual week of concerted and focused prayer was actually created by a fairly hard-line group of Anglo-papalists as an opportunity for prayer for reunion with Rome, but over time it has morphed into its present ecumenical identity. The reason it sits here in the middle of January is because originally it sat between the now suppressed Feast of the Chair of St Peter on January 18, and the feast of the Conversion of St Paul which we shall celebrate on Wednesday. Two great figures in the early church, Peter and Paul, who found each other quite difficult sometimes, enclosing between their feasts an octave of prayer for the reunion of the church.

And it’s just worth reflecting on that theme of unity today. A cursory glance on the internet tells me that there are seven benefices within Salisbury Deanery. The Area Dean, by the way, is some bloke called Kelvin Inglis... And there are nine

Church of England churches in which I could go to worship. And then if you click on any of those individual churches you tend to get a website which tells you a bit about the *style* and *convictions* of each church. Does unity mean that we should all be aiming for the same style? Well, probably not. Should we be singing the same hymns and songs here this morning as they are doing at St Pauls, or St Martin’s? Should we stop wearing robes here? Should they start wearing them at St Pauls? And all this before we begin to consider our ecumenical brothers and sisters.

Unity is probably not important at that level. But the websites then begin to talk about *theological conviction* as well. And here we run into more of a challenge. The Church of England is in the middle of a very public and rather messy debate just at the moment about the nature and status of same-sex relationships. Some information was leaked in the middle of last week, and on Friday the House of Bishops produced a paper recommending that permission be given to either ‘bless’, or ‘say prayers of blessing over’ - which are not quite the same thing as each other - , same-sex couples in church, but not to seek to amend the doctrine of the Church of England on marriage at the moment. My social media feeds have been awl over the past few days. Many of my chums feel that this is far too little far too late. Some of my chums feel that this is much too much and far too soon. MPs are weighing in, and emotions as well as theological debate are high. And again, if you go to the various websites of the churches you will find different things asserted. This church is absolutely clear, and I quote, “St Thomas’ is part of Inclusive Church, which means we are committed to ensure that all are truly welcome, whatever their story.” So our convictions are public and clear.

What do we want to say about unity? Well, I think first of all we need to recognise that the Church has been disunited for a very

long time. The ecumenical councils of the church, starting in 325, bear witness to that. And even some of the formulae at the very heart of our faith are contested. In just a minute we will say the Nicene Creed, and it is worth noting that our Eastern Orthodox brothers and sisters would reject part of what we will all say together. If you just open your service books you will see that we will say that the Holy Spirit “proceeds from the Father and the Son.” Those three words, “and the Son”, *filioque*, in Latin, were added to the Western version of the Nicene Creed in 1014, causing a significant rift with the East. It may also interest you to know that *Common Worship* authorises the use of the creed without those words, therefore putting us back in agreement with the early church, but it hides that version in an appendix and doesn’t really tell anyone that it exists.

We are not in agreement about the Holy Spirit. We are not in agreement about the definition of marriage. We are not in agreement about many other things, like baptism. Ask our Baptist friends.

The second important point, this morning, is that we need to be absolutely clear that the church is not the same thing as the Kingdom of God. We can be terribly arrogant, and we can forget that the church is not the same thing as the Kingdom of God. Verse 13 of our second reading this morning: St Paul writes, “has Christ been divided”? This is rhetoric. The answer is no. “I hear that there are divisions amongst you”, he writes. And then, Christ is not divided.

So our disunity is a sin. We need to be quite clear about that. We are fractured, and that is a sin. And again, I’m not talking about style. It is quite okay to not want to sing anything in F major, or to wear robes. But where our belief is compromised to the point of disunity, as it was in Corinth, that is indicative of a

community that is less than the ideal and the promise of the Kingdom. And when the church hurts people through its disunity, as it is hurting people, and as it has hurt people this week again, we need to be quite clear that it is the church, and not the Kingdom, of God that is inflicting that pain. For God is love alone. And we might note, also, nowhere in the creed of the required to state our belief in the Church of England. Only in the Trinity, and the holy Catholic and apostolic church, which is not at all the same thing as the Church of England.

The beginning of the healing of our disunity has to be the task to which this season of Epiphany calls us, year by year, which is to turn back to the person and nature of Jesus Christ. Paul is clear about that: it is about Christ; it is about the Cross. Christ whom we see gradually more and more clearly as we become more and more like him. As we each seek more, and fresh, epiphanies, revealings, showings of Christ. What is Jesus like? Because the answer to that question tells us what his body on earth should look like.

And if we look at today’s gospel reading, we hear, “Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness.” What does Christ do? He teaches, proclaims, and *heals*. He brings unity. He reunites. Re-members. What should his body be doing? Teaching, proclaiming, and healing. It is a gospel imperative to seek healing. The week of prayer for Christian unity is above all else a week of prayer for healing.

How can you be a healer of the church? Well, by constantly checking that your prayer is facing outward, towards the rest of the family. Towards the growing light of the approach of the Kingdom. The people walking in darkness have seen a great

light. Words we heard on Christmas night, and again this morning. Light is coming, and we move towards it, but we cannot see everything yet. So we must walk on together, with enough humility to recognise that at the moment we are still seeing in a glass, darkly, and with enough hope to know that it is going to get brighter. And with repentance, corporately, for all of the occasions where we have failed the ambition on our website, to be “inclusive, compassionate, and generous.”

We must not confuse diversity and division. Diversity is to be rejoiced in. Division is to be healed. Healed by every day, every hour, every minute, checking ourselves: am I pointing towards Christ? Am I a healer of wounds, rather than an opener of them?

Brothers and sisters, I hear there are divisions amongst you. Is Christ divided?

No. He is not.

Amen.